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INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO PRIORITY 0190
RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 2497
RUEAFVS/OSD FOREIGN VISITS SYSTEM WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 001258

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TO SECRETARY GATES FROM THE AMBASSADOR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/29/2017
TAGS: PGOV PREL MARR OVIP ES
SUBJECT: YOUR VISIT TO EL SALVADOR

Classified By: Ambassador Charles L. Glazer, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶11. (SBU) I'm delighted that you'll be visiting El Salvador. Your presence here will underline the importance of El Salvador's contribution to coalition efforts in Iraq, and offer a boost to our efforts to address the nation's most pressing problem: a public security crisis that has spiraled out of control. The Salvadorans will press you for concrete signs of US appreciation for their presence in Iraq; urge you to help address funding shortfalls; and raise again their hope for Major Non-NATO-Allied status. We should consider GOES requests that reinforce our shared counter-drug, counter-trafficking and public security goals, while offering an important symbolic gesture, such as MNNA status and/or annual staff talks, to our Salvadoran allies.

Political/Economic Overview and Migration Issues

¶12. (C) President Elias Antonio "Tony" Saca of the governing ARENA party assumed office June 1, 2004 after winning a strongly-contested presidential race with 57.7 percent of votes cast. President Saca's center-right ARENA party holds 34 of 84 seats in the Legislative Assembly, but aligns with smaller parties to form a working majority on important issues. The leftist FMLN holds 32 seats. President Saca has made the reinvigoration of El Salvador's economy, the creation of jobs, and improvements in the nation's infrastructure his highest priorities; however, staggering rates of violent crime deflect attention from his economic priorities. The public security crisis could have a major, negative impact on 2009 presidential and legislative elections. We are working closely with the GOES to address this crisis, both by providing resources where we can and by advising the Government on police, legal and criminal procedure reforms.

¶13. (SBU) The economy has been growing slowly at only about two percent per year since 1999, despite its excellent fundamentals. However, last year El Salvador achieved its largest GDP growth rate in a decade, 4.2 percent. El Salvador was the first nation to sign and implement CAFTA-DR; early results are encouraging. In 2007, the positive trend continues with an estimated economic growth rate of 4.5 percent. Some twenty-five percent of Salvadorans live in the

United States, many illegally. Since the 2001 earthquakes, between 250,000 and 280,000 Salvadorans have benefited from Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and have been able to live and work legally in the United States. Remittances from Salvadorans living abroad provide an important source of income for their families in El Salvador. Public opinion polls also show that 7 out of 10 Salvadorans would immigrate to the United States if given the chance. The U.S. debate over immigration reform is followed very closely here.

Civilian-Military Relations

¶4. (C) The Salvadoran Armed Forces (ESAF) are capable, professional, and subordinate to civilian authority. The military consistently receives high approval ratings in public opinion polls, due largely to its response to national emergencies, including earthquakes, hurricanes, and outbreaks of infectious diseases such as Dengue. Salvadoran soldiers also support police in counternarcotics efforts, anti-gang patrols, rural patrols, customs inspections, and reform-school training for juvenile convicts.

¶5. (C) The ESAF continues to focus on force modernization in a constrained budget environment. The ESAF currently has approximately 12,000 total service members and 2,500 administrative personnel. The ESAF's funding level of USD 111 million has changed very little for several years, representing a slightly declining percentage of the national budget. The USD 5 million increase for the ESAF in the latest budget is obligated to a pay raise, so there is no net increase in funds available for operations, training, maintenance, and modernization. Projected FMF levels are disappointing MoD officials preparing to send their ninth rotation to Iraq. The focus of our expenditures is on developing host nation capabilities in disaster relief, peacekeeping, counterterrorism, and illicit trafficking.

OIF Service

¶6. (U) Since August 2003, the GOES has dispatched eight Battalion Cuscatlan contingents of approximately 380 troops each to Iraq. The GOES has pledged to remain as long as needed; Salvadorian counterparts insist that the US stood by them during their difficult times, and that they will stand with us. President Saca recently announced that a ninth contingent would deploy. Salvadoran troops have performed admirably for almost four years in humanitarian and reconstruction efforts. They have also coordinated the reconstruction of local police stations, hospitals, and schools, as well as public works projects such as road improvement and electrical services.

¶7. (C) Salvadoran soldiers were intimately involved in the training and equipping of the Iraqi Civil Defense Forces in Najaf, Al Hillah, and now Al Kut. The national press has positively portrayed the real impact of ESAF efforts and the gratitude of Iraqi provincial leaders. In December 2006 the Legislative Assembly passed a one year extension to President Saca's authority to maintain troops in Iraq through December ¶2007. Opposition to Salvadoran involvement in Iraq runs as high as 70 percent, but Saca portrays himself as a faithful friend of the US, and we believe he will work very hard to renew that authorization later this year.

Peacekeeping and International Agreements

¶8. (SBU) The GOES is interested in peacekeeping opportunities, although the commitment in Iraq and current ESAF budget constraints make such new deployments of troops unlikely for the time being. The UN has certified ESAF as competent for full participation in UN Peacekeeping Operations. The USG has recently released new funding and supplies for training the ESAF to take part in the Global Peacekeeping Operations Initiative (GPOI) in support of a long-term desire of the Conference of Central American Armed

Forces (CFAC) to deploy a combined peacekeeping unit from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua. El Salvador is not a signatory to the International Criminal Court, but signed and ratified Article 98 provisions to the Rome Statute with the U.S. in 2004. In late 2006 the legislature approved a 505 Agreement for U.S.-provided assistance; the Assembly has also approved an agreement for the protection of classified military information and the DoD/DoS preferred global format Status of Forces Agreement.

Counternarcotics and Counterterrorism Issues

19. (C) The Salvadoran government is a valuable partner in the war on drugs . El Salvador is a transit country for narcotics, mainly cocaine and heroin. El Salvador is host to Central America,s only Cooperative Security Location (CSL), as well as to Latin America,s International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA), which provides law enforcement training to personnel from El Salvador and the region. U.S.-funded training and equipment have contributed significantly to improvements in the PNC's Counternarcotics Division. El Salvador's geographic position makes it vulnerable to those trafficking drugs, people, and guns to or from the United States. JIATF-South, with its ability to provide Salvadoran authorities with real-time intelligence, is a great asset; however, the ESAF need additional resources to help us take full advantage of JIATF,s capabilities.

Glazer